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Abstract

Strong, Hendel and Bratton (1971) found that counselors, in relation to psychiatrists, were perceived by students as warm, friendly, and polite people to talk with, although not very bright or knowledgeable. The design of the present study was based on the assumption that the title "counselor" was too generic. The study compared perceptions, held by a sample of 240 students, of counseling psychologists, college counselors, high school counselors, advisers, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. Greater differences were found within the counseling specialties than between counseling psychologists and either clinical psychologists or psychiatrists. Contrary to past research, none of the counseling groups were viewed as "nice guys" in relation to psychiatrists or clinical psychologists. Implications of the findings for both research and public relations efforts were discussed.

PERCEPTIONS OF "COUNSELORS" AND OTHER HELP GIVERS:

WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

Perceptions of counselors held by relevant campus groups have been of continuing concern to counseling psychologists. Typically, studies have examined the relative appropriateness for counseling of various problem areas (e.g., personal, vocational) as viewed by different campus groups, e.g., students, counselors, faculty (Dunlap, 1965; Gelso, Karl & O'Connell, 1972; Resnick & Gelso, 1971; Warman, 1960; Wilcove & Sharp, 1971). One recent strategy, however, has entailed comparing students' perceptions of counselors and other help givers in terms of personal characteristics and problems appropriate for treatment by each professional group (Strong, Hendel & Bratton, 1971). Specifically, Strong, et al., had students describe counselors, advisers and psychiatrists on 100 adjectives representing personal characteristics. Students also responded to nine problem topics in terms of the likelihood of each student discussing each problem with one of the three professionals. From this research Strong, et al., concluded that: Counselors are good resources for dealing with vocational and educational problems; they are also sources of help with some specific personal problems. As the problems become more severe and difficult, the more knowledgeable, analytic, and intense psychiatrist is more appropriate. While counselors may not be too bright and knowledgeable, they are warm, friendly, and polite people to talk with [1971, p. 237; italics added].

A major problem with the Strong, et al., design resides in their use of the generic label, Counselor. In fact, this term serves as an umbrella, subsuming a variety of professionals, differing in type of degree background and amount of graduate training. The present study sought to extend the Strong, et al., investigation by comparing students' perceptions of three titles within the counseling profession (high school counselor, college counselor, counseling psychologist) with each other and with the titles adviser, psychiatrist, and clinical psychologist. This last title was added because of the often-debated similarities and differences between clinical and counseling psychology. A secondary purpose of the present study was to determine if sex differences existed with respect to differential perceptions of the six professional titles. Strong, et al., only studied females, although sex differences on the present topic seemed likely, since additional research (Wilcove & Sharp, 1971) indicates that males and females differ in the problems viewed as appropriate for discussion with counselors.

Of special interest in the present research were the similarities and differences between perceptions of counseling psychologists and the remaining five groups, both those within and outside the counseling profession.

Method

All students (n = 436) in one section of introductory psychology at the University of Maryland were administered the Strong, et al., (1971) questionnaire during their first class meeting of the 1971 Autumn Semester. The questionnaire contained 100 adjectives describing personal characteristics and nine problem topics. Questionnaires were arranged so that one out

of every series of six contained the title Counseling Psychologist, one contained the title Psychiatrist, and so on for the remaining four titles (High School Counselor, College Counselor, Clinical Psychologist, Adviser). Thus, each student completed the questionnaire with reference to a different title (between-subjects design). Students described their assigned help-giver by (a) how well each of the 100 adjectives described the role person on a 5-point scale where 1 = not at all descriptive, 2 = slightly descriptive, 3 = moderately descriptive, 4 = descriptive, and 5 = very descriptive; and (b) indicating the likelihood of their discussing each of the nine problem topics with their assigned help-giver. Alternatives were: 1 = very unlikely, 2 = probably not, 3 = maybe, 4 = probably, and 5 = very probably. Specific instructions to students were identical to those used by Strong, et al., (1971). In essence students were asked, in written instructions, to give their ideas of what the help giver designated on their questionnaire was like by determining how well each of the 100 adjectives described that person and to indicate how likely they were to discuss each of the nine problems with a person in that profession.

Following the administration, 40 (20 of each sex) questionnaires were selected randomly from the approximately 73 which responded to each professional group. An n of 40 per group was selected because it was similar enough to the n's in the Strong, et al., study to provide comparable statistical sensitivity and it was not so large that inconsequential between-group differences would attain statistical significance (see Hays, 1963, pp. 323-324). Thus, in its final form the design was a completely crossed and balanced 2 by 6 (sex by professional group) factorial design with 20 subjects in each treatment-combination cell ($n = 240$). Fifty-two percent of the subjects were freshmen and thirty-one percent were sophomores.

Results

Two-way analyses of variance (sex by professional group) were computed on subjects' ratings of the 100 adjectives from the adjective check list. In only one case did the interaction between sex and professional group attain statistical significance ($p < .05$), indicating that similarities and differences in perceptions of characteristics of practitioners in the six professional groups did not depend on subject sex. Significant main effects for professional group did emerge on 18 of the adjectives. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each group on these adjectives, along with the F ratios and probability levels of the differences between means.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Duncan Multiple-Range Test was utilized to test the significance of the difference between each pair of means for each adjective on which significant F ratios emerged.[1] The counseling psychologist differed minimally from the psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, and adviser. He only was more casual than the psychiatrist, more casual and less curious than the clinical psychologist, and more casual and flighty than the adviser.

As compared to the college counselor, however, the counseling psychologist was more inquisitive, analytic, and knowledgeable on the one hand and more casual and flighty on the other. In addition, the counseling psychologist, as compared to the high school counselor, was more inquisitive, analytic, knowledgeable, purposeful, interesting, and tactful; conversely, he was less dull, uninterested and inaccurate.

While the counseling psychologist differed little from the psychiatrist, the college counselor differed much from the psychiatrist (psychiatrist being more inquisitive, analytic, curious, knowledgeable, intellectual, patient, tactful, persistent and stubborn). Finally, although high school and college counselors differed minimally, the school counselor differed in many ways from the counseling psychologist, clinical psychologist, and psychiatrist. The flavor of these differences was quite similar for the latter three groups, e.g., school counselor being less knowledgeable, analytic, purposeful, and interesting and more dull and uninterested than the three groups.

Two-way analyses of variance were performed on subjects' ratings of the likelihood of their seeking help from each professional on the nine problem topics. Again, sex by professional group interactions were not present. The two topics related to educational and vocational counseling (difficulty with grades and choice of occupation) failed to produce significant between-professional group differences, while the remaining seven items, those related to personal counseling or therapy, all yielded significant F ratios. Table presents the means and standard deviations of each group on each topic and the F ratios and probability levels from the analyses of variance.

Insert Table 2 about here

Duncan's Multiple Range Tests revealed that subjects were more likely to discuss difficult relations with family, problems in getting along with friends, uncomfortable feelings and emotions, and problems in sexual adjustment with psychiatrists than counseling psychologists. These two groups, however, did not differ in the likelihood that subjects would discuss with them personal concerns revolving around achieving self-development and fulfillment, and gaining insight into personal strengths and weaknesses. Clinical and counseling psychologists differed only in subjects being more likely to discuss difficult relations with family with clinicians.

Subjects were significantly more likely to discuss all seven topics reflecting personal concerns with psychiatrists than college counselors, advisers, or high school counselors. This same pattern emerged when these latter three specialists were compared to both counseling and clinical psychologists, although the differences did not always attain statistical significance. In the case of the counseling psychologist, he was seen as a significantly more likely source of help than college counselors, advisers, and high school counselors for dealing with uncomfortable feelings and emotions and for gaining insight into strengths and weaknesses. Finally, counseling psychologists also were more likely sources than college counselors for problems in getting along with friends, and more likely sources than advisers in achieving self-development and fulfillment.

Discussion

A central finding of this study was that more differences emerged among students' perceptions of the three counseling specialties than between counseling psychologists and either clinical psychologists or psychiatrists. In fact, counseling psychologists and psychiatrists differed on the adjective check list only in counseling pyschologists being perceived as more casual than psychiatrists. This result indicates that investigators need to specify the area within the counseling profession that they intend subjects to evaluate. The generic title "counselor", as employed by Strong, Hendel and Bratton (1971), seems to be generic to the point that it yields specious conclusions.

The present findings differ from those of Strong, Hendel and Bratton in additional ways. Between-group differences were found on 41 of the 100 adjectives by the aforementioned researchers, while the present study uncovered such differences on only 18 adjectives. In addition, neither of the three counseling specialists in the present study was found to be more warm, friendly, and polite than psychiatrists. Thus, "counselors" were not found to be the "nice guys" that Strong, et al., suggested they were (see also, Gometz & Parker, 1968). Although these discrepancies cannot be explained with certitude, the Strong, et al., study was conducted in the Midwest, while the present one was done at an Eastern university. Regional differences (and their corollaries) between the two studies may at least partly underlie some of the differences found in perceptions of both "counselors" and psychiatrists.

Of special interest were the differences between perceptions of college counselors and counseling psychologists, titles or labels that are often used interchangeably. Counseling psychologists were perceived as more knowledgeable, inquisitive, and analytic on the one hand, and more casual and flighty on the other. In addition, counseling psychologists were seen as being more likely sources of help for a variety of personal concerns than were college counselors. These differences have implications for both research and public relations efforts. Much research, for example, has uncovered discrepancies between the roles "counselors" in university counseling centers ascribe to themselves and the roles ascribed to them by their publics (see Gelso & McKenzie, 1973; Gelso, et al., 1972; Resnick & Gelso, 1971; Warman, 1960; Wilcove & Sharp, 1971). Such research typically has used the label "counselor" or "college counselor" in studying perceptions of various groups. Inasmuch as professionals who are titled college counselors frequently are also counseling psychologists, the results are then, at least implicitly, extrapolated to counseling psychology and its perceived roles. The present findings raise serious questions about the appropriateness of such extrapolations.

Regarding public relations efforts, the results indicate that professionals at counseling centers would do well to inform their publics that they are counseling or clinical psychologists when appropriate. Such titles generally elicit more desirable perceptions of personal characteristics (e.g., knowledgeable) and they may increase the likelihood that students will seek help from these centers with a variety of personal concerns. When college counselors are not counseling or clinical psychologists, the findings imply that they need to make additional efforts to alter students' perceptions, e.g., more effectively inform students that they are legitimate sources of help for a variety of personal concerns.

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Footnotes

[1] For the sake of brevity, only the most relevant *a posteriori* comparisons from the analyses in Tables 1 and 2 are noted, and the probability levels are not given (all discussed as significant attained at least the .05 level). Copies of tables presenting each comparison along with its p value are available gratis from the first author.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and F Ratios for the 18 Adjectives in Which Significant Differences Occurred Among the Six Professional Groups

Adjective	Professional Group												
	High School Counselor (n = 40)		Adviser (n = 40)		College Counselor (n = 40)		Counseling Psychologist (n = 40)		Clinical Psychologist (n = 40)		Psychiatrist (n = 40)		F
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Knowledgeable	3.15	1.33	4.00	.68	3.78	1.05	4.08	.89	3.90	.96	4.08	.94	5.04**
Flighty	2.20	1.22	1.67	.95	1.58	.72	2.30	1.06	1.60	.71	2.03	1.17	4.59**
Curious	3.50	.91	3.35	1.04	3.18	1.15	3.48	1.08	4.08	.86	3.83	.91	4.29**
Inquisitive	3.65	1.19	3.68	1.05	3.53	1.10	4.08	1.08	3.95	.99	4.23	1.05	3.93**
Analytic	3.13	1.07	3.45	1.04	3.25	.84	3.80	1.04	3.75	.90	3.85	1.23	3.81**
Dull	2.58	1.48	2.00	1.06	2.13	1.25	1.63	.81	1.70	.97	1.83	1.04	3.81**
Purposeful	3.10	1.13	3.50	.88	3.43	.91	3.70	.82	3.70	.97	3.80	.85	3.37**
Uninterested	2.30	1.29	1.88	1.07	1.83	.85	1.58	1.04	1.45	.99	1.70	1.04	3.06**
Tactful	3.03	1.21	3.75	.67	3.18	1.17	3.58	1.14	3.43	1.08	3.75	1.21	2.98**
Thorough	3.33	1.06	3.28	1.08	3.63	1.02	3.63	1.07	3.95	.85	3.88	.86	2.90**

Note - ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Table 1 (cont'd.)

Adjective	Professional Group												
	High School Counselor (n = 40)		Adviser (n = 40)		College Counselor (n = 40)		Counseling Psychologist (n = 40)		Clinical Psychologist (n = 40)		Psychiatrist (n = 40)		F
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Intellectual	3.30	1.20	3.63	.93	3.36	1.10	3.80	1.02	3.65	.95	4.00	.91	2.76*
Patient	3.28	1.15	3.65	1.13	3.40	1.09	3.78	.96	3.50	.98	4.03	.94	2.70*
Stubborn	3.80	1.31	3.03	1.06	3.15	1.04	3.35	1.16	3.65	1.19	3.80	1.13	2.63*
Casual	3.10	1.11	3.25	1.03	3.15	1.09	3.73	.91	3.05	.96	3.03	1.07	2.59*
Interesting	2.95	1.38	3.45	1.01	3.13	1.11	3.68	1.21	3.70	1.09	3.58	1.13	2.52*
Persistant	3.28	1.10	3.15	1.02	3.23	1.04	3.60	.73	3.58	1.01	3.78	1.04	2.52*
Inaccurate	2.43	1.26	1.65	.77	2.00	1.15	1.88	1.02	1.83	1.06	2.08	1.12	2.48*
Spontaneous	2.43	1.08	2.28	1.13	2.50	1.14	2.78	1.03	2.65	1.23	3.05	1.20	2.27*

Table 2

The Likelihood of Students Discussing Each Problem Topic with the Members of Each Professional Specialty

Problem Topic	Professional Group												
	High School Counselor (n = 40)		Adviser (n = 40)		College Counselor (n = 40)		Counseling Psychologist (n = 40)		Clinical Psychologist (n = 40)		Psychiatrist (n = 40)		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	F
Choice of Occupation	3.50	1.41	3.60	1.36	3.60	1.32	3.38	1.35	3.35	1.17	3.20	1.54	.54
Difficulty with Grades	3.55	1.24	3.55	1.18	3.43	1.43	3.05	1.50	2.98	1.25	3.15	1.53	1.41
Achieving Self-development or Fulfillment	3.00	1.38	2.73	1.26	2.88	1.31	3.40	1.28	3.38	1.15	3.55	1.18	2.84*
Gaining Insight into Personal Strengths and Weaknesses	2.58	1.41	2.88	1.34	2.98	1.23	3.55	1.28	3.63	1.19	3.73	1.15	5.68**
Difficult Relations with Family	2.47	1.48	2.45	1.15	2.20	1.27	2.85	1.48	3.45	1.38	3.47	1.38	6.88**
Developing More Effective Ways of Handling Personal Problems	2.65	1.53	2.83	1.20	2.68	1.40	3.25	1.37	3.63	1.17	3.90	1.06	6.19**
Problems in Getting Along with Friends	2.35	1.39	2.30	1.20	2.00	1.33	2.78	1.35	3.15	1.5	3.40	1.32	6.48**
Uncomfortable Feelings and Emotions	2.33	1.47	2.23	1.14	2.15	1.31	3.05	1.34	3.45	1.30	3.85	1.15	11.96**
Problems of Sexual Adjustment	2.10	1.46	1.83	.96	1.85	1.12	2.43	1.30	2.98	1.42	3.18	1.50	7.81**

Note - ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$